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## Towards reconceptualising teacher education for English: Benefits and challenges of implementing a third space

### **Abstract**

One of the long-lasting challenges in teacher education for English is that students in English struggle with transforming their academic knowledge (theory) into classroom practice and desire a more practice-integrated course design. The present article discusses and evaluates a teaching strategy, in an attempt to provide more practice-based English courses, which intends to adopt the emerging epistemology of teacher education, using a third space. The third space is an arena where a theory field (university courses) and a practice field (schools) are brought together as an integrated domain for developing students' academic knowledge and teaching competence.

Based on surveys and student evaluations, this article presents and discusses the findings and challenges regarding implementing a third space in English courses taught by the authors. According to the findings, working in a third space brings a tighter connection between theory and practice, which facilitates students' understanding of theory and the important interplay between theory and practice. However, as our third space is still under development, it faces challenges in achieving an equally balanced status between university teachers and schoolteachers. Achieving such a balance has also been a central concern in university–school partnerships, which gave rise to our third space experiment.

In order to create a more effective third space in teacher education for English, placing the third space at the centre of our English curriculum is argued to be important, which has also been emphasised in other studies discussing the third space epistemology. Thus, there seems to be an emergent need to reconceptualise how student teachers of English should best prepare for their future profession as teachers.

**Keywords:** teacher education for English, third space, theory–practice integration, university–school partnership

## På vei mot rekontekstualisering av lærerutdanning i engelsk: Fordeler og utfordringer ved å implementere et tredje rom

### **Sammendrag**

Det har lenge vært en utfordring at studenter som studerer engelsk som en del av sin grunnskolelærerutdanning, har problemer med å omforme akademisk kunnskap til praktisk anvendelse i klasserommet. De har derfor uttrykt et ønske om mer praksis

integreert i utdanninga. Denne artikkelen diskuterer og evaluerer en undervisningsstrategi i et forsøk på å skape mer praksisbaserte kurs i engelsk, og som implementerer en epistemologi i lærerutdanning som tar i bruk et tredje rom. Det tredje rom er en arena som integrerer akademisk kunnskap og praksis i klasserommet, og som sikter mot å utvikle studentenes fag- og undervisningskompetanse.

Gjennom spørreskjemaer og studentevalueringer undersøkes studenters erfaringer og vurderinger av arbeidet i et tredje rom i engelskfaget, og artikkelen presenterer de viktigste funnene og utfordringene som kom fram gjennom datamaterialet. Materialet viser at å arbeide i et tredje rom fører til en bedre integrasjon av teori og praksis, som også fasiliterer studentenes forståelse av teori og det viktige samspillet mellom teori og praksis. Tredje rom-strategien som diskuteres her, er fortsatt under utvikling, og artikkelen belyser også utfordringer i det å oppnå en harmonisering av status mellom universitetslærere og skolelærere. Det er også et viktig anliggende i universitet–skole-partnerskap som er plattformen for samarbeid i dette prosjektet.

For å videreutvikle og perfektionere et tredje rom i lærerutdanning i engelsk, bør et tredje rom sees på som det sentrale punkt i utdanninga, noe som også andre studier påpeker. Derfor er det nødvendig å tenke gjennom på nytt hvordan lærerstudenter best kan forberede seg til sin framtidige profesjon som lærere.

Nøkkelord: lærerutdanning i engelsk, tredje rom, integrasjon av teori og praksis, universitet–skole-partnerskap

## Introduction

Educators and policy makers internationally seem to call for a transformation of teacher preparation programmes, with a strengthened focus on innovation and collaboration within institutions and among participants involved in teacher education. There has been growing interest in favour of collaborative, enquiry-based approaches, blending academic and practitioner knowledge in teacher preparation. Establishing stronger links between university-based content<sup>1</sup> and classroom practices is seen as productive in teacher education programmes (BERA [British Educational Research Association], 2014; NCATE [National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education], 2010; Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2018). According to NCATE (2010), there is a need for “a dramatic overhaul of how teachers are prepared”. As “teaching is a profession of practice”, prospective teachers are expected to be “expert practitioners” and should be prepared accordingly (p. 2). Consequently, practice must be placed at the centre of teacher education programmes (NCATE, 2010).

One of the long-lasting challenges in Norwegian teacher education for the subject of English (and perhaps for other subjects too) is that students need to develop not only sufficient academic knowledge in English and English teaching but also skills to transfer their academic knowledge into actual classroom teaching. This requires, in our view, that academic contents be taught in close

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<sup>1</sup> *Academic knowledge* and *theory* are supplementary terms used in this paper for practical reasons.

connection with actual teaching practice, but it has been difficult to bring about such a connection between the two in the current design of our English courses. The reason may be that students' school placement periods are limited to, for example, three weeks in the autumn and another two or three weeks in the spring semester in each academic year, except for the final year of teacher education. During both practice periods arranged each year, student teachers are supervised mainly by practice teachers at school with little involvement of university teachers; i.e., teaching practice is rather detached from academic courses. The current arrangement of teaching practice has thus made it difficult to fully integrate academic content with the practical application of it in teaching.

Students pursuing a teaching profession in the ten-year obligatory primary and lower secondary education in Norway can choose between two integrated five-year master's programmes. They are Master of Education Years 1–7, where students specialise in teaching pupils in Years 1–7, and Master of Education Years 5–10, where they specialise in teaching pupils in Years 5–10. Having taught courses in English as part of these programmes over several years, we (the authors) have experienced that students often struggle with transforming their academic knowledge into classroom practice, under the current arrangement of school placements, and thus, they desire a more practice-integrated course design. In order to deal with such a challenge, mainly two important requirements should be met: 1) a partnership with a teacher education school<sup>2</sup>, which provides 2) an arena where student teachers can practise enquiry-based teaching and try out academic concepts in authentic teaching situations. Klein, Taylor, Onore, Strom & Abrams (2013) and Jónsdóttir (2015), among others, discuss the creation of such an arena, *a third space*, in teacher education; by addressing the disconnect between academic content studied at the university and teaching practice, they detail a new epistemology of teacher education which integrates the two. Klein et al. (2013) invite others “engaged in third-space work” to join them “in sharing [...] successes and challenges” as “the radical shifts involved in this kind of work require open dialog among colleagues across settings” (Klein et al., 2013, p. 51).

The present article is an answer to that invitation. It discusses a teaching strategy implemented in our teacher education courses for English (previously called ‘Praksisopplegg’<sup>3</sup>), which is reinterpreted as an emerging third space, trying to minimise the gap between theory and practice. Although this strategy encapsulating the third space epistemology is still not fully developed, our findings suggest that it can be seen as one possible solution to providing more practice-integrated courses in English in, and perhaps beyond, our own institution. A third space in the context of teacher preparation programmes is regarded as a type of *hybrid space* (Cuenca, Schmeichel, Butler, Dinkelman, & Nichols Jr.,

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<sup>2</sup> The term *teacher education school* is used by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (2018) and refers to (local) schools engaged in partnerships with teacher education universities. We use this term throughout the paper.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Praksisopplegg’ is a term we have previously used to refer to the entire process of students’ planning and testing out of lesson plans, followed by a reflection session.

2011; Harfitt & Chow, 2018; Jensen, Klette, & Hammerness, 2018; Jónsdóttir, 2015; Klein et al., 2013; Williams, 2014; Zeichner, 2010), where separate arenas responsible for educating student teachers, a *theory field* (university campus) and a *practice field* (schools), are brought together as an integrated domain for developing students' academic knowledge and teaching competence. The intention behind creating a third space in our English courses is thus to bring about a stronger connection between theory and practice, which would facilitate students' understanding of theory and the important interplay between theory and practice. The research question thus is: *To what extent can working in a third space minimise the theory–practice divide in teacher education for English, and how can students benefit from it in their learning processes?*

The paper is organised as follows: The next section presents the theoretical background that our third space strategy is built on and discusses the concept of a third space in more detail. The following section outlines our developing third space strategy and discusses student teachers' experiences and evaluation of working in a third space. Then we present our findings and discussion. As our third space work is still under development, we further point out challenges that need to be tackled in order to create a fully-functioning third space that places university teachers and schoolteachers as equally important binaries, before concluding the paper.

## Theory and background

### **University–school partnerships**

Since strengthened integration between academic knowledge and classroom application in teacher preparation is currently a key concern (see for example, BERA, 2014; Jensen, Klette, & Hammerness, 2018; NCATE, 2010; Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2018), there has been an international effort to make teacher education more practice-based. A growing number of international studies (e.g., in Britain, the United States, the Netherlands, and Australia) has recognised that teacher candidates benefit from education based in practice (BERA, 2014; Jensen, Klette, & Hammerness, 2018; Zeichner, 2012). In Australia, for example, there has been an emphasis on encouraging universities and schools to work together in partnerships. Substantial resources have thus been “allocated to assist universities and schools to work together to develop models of teacher education that involve closer links between teachers in schools and teacher educators in universities” (Williams, 2014, p. 315).

Establishing university–school partnerships is also a central measure in the national strategy for Norwegian teacher education programmes towards 2025 (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2018). The national emphasis on developing partnerships may be explained partly by international trends (BERA, 2014; Jensen, Klette, & Hammerness, 2018; NCATE, 2010; Norwegian

Ministry of Education and Research, 2018). However, *The University School Project* (UiT, n.d.), established at UiT the Arctic University of Norway and the University of Oslo in 2011, has also played an important role in marking out the course for Norwegian teacher education, by encouraging extended collaboration between university campuses and teacher education schools. The two parties are obliged to work in close collaboration to develop teaching practices and teachers' professional competence, and to focus on research and development on educational issues (UiT, n.d.). The university–school partnership thus offers increased opportunities to collaborate with teacher education schools. It is this partnership we utilise as an important premise in trying to establish a third space, in order to strengthen the links between academic knowledge and teaching practice.

### **Third space**

There is an increasing concern in teacher education research about connecting practice experience more tightly to coursework and making teacher education more practice-based (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Jensen, Klette, & Hammerness, 2018; Zeichner, 2010). Even though current teacher education programmes in Norway normally include school practice, there still seems to be a continual disconnect between the content students are taught in campus courses and what they experience or are able to put into practice during their obligatory practice periods in schools. There has thus been a growing interest in strengthening the links to practice by grounding teacher preparation programmes more deeply in practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Jensen, Klette, & Hammerness, 2018). To further remedy the disparity between theoretical coursework and practice in schools, a third space, a collaborative arena where academic course content meets practice, has been put forward as a potential solution. The third space thus intends to provide a strengthened connection between academic knowledge and classroom practices (BERA, 2014; Cuenca et al., 2011; Jensen, Klette, & Hammerness, 2018; Jónsdóttir, 2015; Klein et al., 2013; NCATE, 2010; Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2018; Williams, 2014; Zeichner, 2010). Such a connection recognises practitioner and academic knowledge as binaries, equally important in teacher preparation, where theory and practice are no longer seen as competing discourses – “an either/or perspective” – but more as a “both/also point of view” (Zeichner, 2010, p. 92). Zeichner (2010) also believes that a closer interplay between the academic and practitioner knowledge in a hybrid/third space will create expanded learning opportunities for student teachers.

The concept of *third space* originated in Bhabha's postcolonial discussion on cultural hybridity, which relates to “the unresolved tensions between cultures and countries” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 2) that he, himself, had experienced in his childhood in India – a country at that time coloured by imperial power and repression. Bhabha's third space is a hybrid space, encapsulating the existence of both the

colonisers and the colonised/the marginalised. Third spaces are the “‘inbetween’ spaces” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 2), where the distinct, binary cultures meet and elaborate new strategies for coexistence and collaboration. By the “articulation of cultural differences” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 2), such innovative spaces may thus initiate ideas that can redefine society and give rise to “something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Bhabha in Rutherford, 1990, p. 211). In the context of teacher education, *a new area of negotiation* (i.e., a hybrid/third space) may thus open up learning opportunities through new forms of activity and engagement, which may ultimately modify both the mindset of participants in the third space and the practice itself. Bhabha believes that “individuals draw on multiple discourses to make sense of the world” (Cuenca et al., 2011, p. 1069), and third spaces may be used as platforms for (1) building bridges between distinct or competing discourses, (2) boundary-crossing spaces in which members need to navigate between different discourse communities, and (3) conversational spaces, which have the potential to bring about epistemological changes, such as changes to academic content or curricula (Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo, & Collazo, 2004). The third space is thus “a transformative space where the potential for an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened” (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 152).

Applying Bhabha’s concept of third space in redesigning teacher education in Norway, it is thus necessary to bring the domains of academic knowledge and practitioner knowledge into the third space, to enable new perspectives and new structures of authority to emerge (Bhabha in Rutherford, 1990). As we see it, putting the third space to work may imply, for example, a redesign of teacher preparation programmes which includes more “‘realistic’ or ‘authentic’ approaches to teacher education” (BERA, 2014, p. 23). The third spaces in teacher education may thus “play a similar role to teaching hospitals in medical education” (NCATE, 2010, p. 8; see also Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2018) in supporting student teachers with a more practice-based academic course.

In the present context, *third space* is interpreted as an arena where student teachers of English can investigate, try out and reflect on academic knowledge (e.g., issues of grammar and phonetics and teaching approaches) in real classroom situations beyond the obligatory school placement periods. Bringing together pupils, student teachers, schoolteachers and teacher educators in collaborative and dialogical settings, the goal of our third space strategy is to facilitate a non-hierarchical status among the participants engaged in teacher education for English. Furthermore, drawing on the collective knowledge from all the participants, as well as learning from classroom practice, may enhance student teachers’ competences. In conclusion, it is fair to say, “third spaces attempt to integrate—or hybridize—competing forms of knowledge and discourse” (Cuenca et al., 2011, p. 1069): in this case, academic knowledge and teaching practice.

## Experiential learning

Practices within the third space are largely rooted in the experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2015), where student teachers are given opportunities to try out, experience and reflect on their lesson plans. Kolb argues that the life force, energy and expression of each unique individual are imperative to his/her development. Kolb uses his experiential learning paradigm to explain how people learn, and aims “to empower learners to trust their own experience and gain mastery over their own learning” (Kolb, 2015, p. 53). The theory further assumes that knowledge is formed and modified through experience, in which learners’ experience, engagement, explanation, reflection and discussion are vital in knowledge construction (Kolb, 2015; see also Breunig, 2009; Dewey, 1938/1997; Harfitt & Chow, 2018; Moon, 2004). The dynamics of learning could thus be explained as a spiral (or cycle) of the four bases, *concrete experience*, *reflective observation*, *abstract conceptualisation* and *active experimentation*, in a recursive knowledge-developing process (Kolb, 2015). This combination of learning modes suggests an integrative, holistic perspective which views knowledge construction as dynamic processes of enquiry rather than as “transmission of fixed content” (Kolb, 2015, p. 38).

Student teachers’ experiential trials of their own lesson plans are dynamic processes. Carrying them out in the third space can potentially yield valuable reflections on their pedagogical considerations and further indicate what modifications need to be made to best serve the purpose of a particular lesson plan. In our third space trials, the participants use an experiential learning approach (Kolb, 2015), aiming to develop a new form of practice based on the two distinct discourses: namely, academic knowledge and teaching practice. Both forms of discourse have traditionally represented “difference” and “otherness” (Bhabha in Rutherford, 1990) to each other but still embody important constituents of teacher education. Applying an experiential learning approach, participants working in a third space may find that the two traditionally competing forms of discourse (Cuenca et al., 2011) can mutually inspire and support practice through experience and reflection. On these grounds, we believe that applying a theoretical framework that encourages thinking beyond the borders of one’s own domain (be it academic knowledge or teaching practice) can move practice development forward. An experiential learning approach may thus encourage enquiry-driven academic courses by joining together the academic and practitioner knowledge of teacher education. In our third space trials, we aim to provide English courses in which classroom application illuminates and clarifies the academic course work, and vice versa, “making the practical theoretical and the theoretical practical” (Klein et al., 2013, p. 39).

Experiential learning is seen by some “as a way to revitalise the university curriculum” (Kolb, 2015, p. 4). Even though the experiential learning theory is not a recent idea in educational research (see, for example, Dewey, 1938), it has recently regained interest and attention as it conforms with current pedagogical

thinking about collaborative and enquiry-driven approaches in teacher education (BERA, 2014; NCATE, 2010; Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2018). Consequently, teaching may be more focused on the engagement of students in their own learning, recognising them as active thinkers and adjusting activities in ways that can enhance their learning (Wright, 2011).

## Creating a third space in English courses

### **Procedures and data collection**

Building on the theory of experiential learning discussed in the previous section, we have placed an emphasis on balancing academic knowledge (theory) and classroom application (practice) over recent years. In order to better integrate theory and practice, a third space has been implemented and tested, with a group of pupils from a nearby teacher education school being invited to the campus for teaching practice, in collaboration with a schoolteacher. The first attempt to create such a space was made in 2014, involving 10 students of English enrolled in the programme Master of Education Years 1–7, two teacher educators, a group of Year 7 pupils and their English teacher. The student teachers were in their fifth year of education and were divided into two groups, which were the bases for all phases of working in a third space.

The students planned and carried out three teaching sessions with the Year 7 pupils. Prior to these sessions, they worked on grammar and phonetics topics, as well as second language acquisition theory and teaching methods. The students were allocated approximately two hours to prepare their lessons for each trial in the third space. Thereafter, the two student groups spent 45 minutes on testing out their lesson plans with the pupils. In total, the students taught two lessons on grammar and one on pronunciation, carried out in different parts of the campus (e.g., classroom, gymnasium, and outdoors). The learning activities included tasks that facilitated pupils' learning in a variety of ways, with the pupils being both exposed to English (input) and prompted to use it (output). Each teaching trial was followed by a group reflection session, where various issues, such as teaching approaches, theories on second language acquisition and methodological choices, were discussed in relation to the recent teaching experience (Holmbukt & Son, 2017). Since the first trial in creating a third space in our English course was successful, with positive responses from the students, the attempt to create a third space in partnership with a teacher education school has been made every year with different student groups. The findings discussed in the article are based mainly on the third space experiment carried out in 2014, as a more thorough investigation of students' perception and evaluation of working in a third space was carried out. However, student responses in the following years comply with and support the findings from 2014 reported in the current article.

## Data collection

In order to investigate student teachers' perceptions about their third space experiences and the impact of working in a third space on students' learning, students each year were asked to participate in a course evaluation survey at the end of the course. In 2014, an extra survey, focusing on the third space experience, was sent out to the students a few months after they had started their teaching profession, which helped them reflect on their teacher education in light of having obtained some professional experience. The second-round survey also helped validate the findings from the first course evaluation survey.

In the course evaluation survey, the students were asked to answer questions regarding the course content (e.g., work load, assignments, examination); here, they also mentioned working in a third space ('Praksisopplegg' in our earlier work) as one of the positive elements of the course. The survey directly investigating the students' experiences in working in a third space consisted of twelve questions and aimed to investigate the following information: students' knowledge about grammar, phonetics, and grammar teaching before and after the third space trials, their positive and/or negative assessments of the third space and, finally, reflection on how teacher education programmes could prepare students for teaching English (in particular, grammar) in a more effective way (see Holmbukt & Son, 2017 for specific survey questions). In both surveys, the students were invited to express their opinions in great detail.

## Data analysis

The collected data were read through carefully in a coding process. The responses were also organised in categories to correspond with the survey questions, in order to make the analysis process manageable and effective. The students' responses for each question were compared and organised with the same coding, if they displayed a similar opinion or phenomenon. Such an open coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) often results in a large number of codes, which requires code grouping in order to get an overview of data materials (Postholm, 2010). The data materials based on the students' responses were thus organised in four main categories, "before the course", "after the course", "Praksisopplegg (now reinterpreted as *third space*): benefits and challenges", and "reflection", which roughly correspond to the order of the survey questions. The findings presented and discussed here are based on the answers to the two aforementioned surveys from 2014.

## Findings and discussion

### Benefits and challenges of working in a third space ('Praksisopplegg')

The overall responses from the participants regarding working in a third space were positive: students reported that while lectures and seminars helped them

strengthen theoretical foundations (e.g., theory on second language acquisition, grammar and phonetics), working in a third space provided opportunities for developing pedagogical competence through a sequence of trials and failures and collaboration with fellow students (as also observed in Zeichner, 2010; Cuenca et al., 2011; Harfitt & Chow, 2018). In particular, the third space was reported to provide better opportunities than in ordinary school practice for developing methodological judgements in teaching English grammar. One informant, for example, reported that working in a third space gave a thought-provoking experience in realising how easily grammar teaching can be done with fun, but at the same time how difficult it can be to teach grammar. This informant further reported:

I am sure that having a chance to work in a third space is the reason why I feel so secure [in my teaching] since I was allowed to try and learn from my mistakes. I have completely messed up [in some trials] but I have also had some good teaching schemes where I felt a sense of mastery. This has clearly given me better insights into the subject as well. (our translation)

The students' experiences clearly support Kolb's (2015) experiential learning paradigm, which sees knowledge construction as dynamic processes in which learners experience, reflect and eventually gain mastery of their own learning (see also Harfitt & Chow, 2018; Zeichner, 2010).

Another positive aspect of working in a third space, according to our informants, is that academic content is better understood and consolidated by working from a more practical perspective, which confirms the benefit of integrating theory and practice. A third space may be seen as a "transformative space", which has the potential for "an expanded form of learning" (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 152) through navigating across boundaries of distinct discourses, for example of theory and practice. The essence of a third space, in providing the potential for expanded learning, is thus clearly indicated by our informants, who report that their understanding of academic content is strengthened by integrating theory and practice. Enhanced learning within a third space is also confirmed by the following informant:

I personally learn best when I am active and can use the English language, methods and so on in discussion and collaboration with others. One can reflect on what works and what does not work, why and how one can improve the next time. (our translation)

This is also in line with Kolb's (2015) theory on learning as a cycle of experience and reflection.

The participants further reported that their understanding of relevant academic content was better facilitated in the more focused, meaningful teaching contexts provided in the third space. This is illustrated below:

The third spaces are focused only on English, which I liked very much and learned more from. In ordinary practice periods, we normally teach all subjects and often with larger

projects, which results in putting some subjects out of the focus during our school placement periods, often English. (our translation)

According to our informants, a sharpened focus on English and quick feedback from university teachers were what contributed most to the valuable experience of the third space for students' learning (Holmbukt & Son, 2017). Having university teachers involved in the different phases of the teaching trials is thus perceived as one of the most positive aspects of a third space. The participants find that having immediate reflection and constructive feedback sessions with the university teachers after each third space trial has a positive effect on learning. This allows them a chance to evaluate and reconceptualise their own teaching for further improvement, which again confirms the benefit of constructing knowledge in a spiral of experience, reflection, (re-)conceptualisation and active experimentation (for example, making improvements in lesson plans) (Kolb, 2015; Harfitt & Chow, 2018; Zeichner, 2010).

Including the third space strategy as part of the English course, therefore, may fill the gap seen in ordinary practice periods, which have little involvement of university teachers beyond the scheduled visit during each practice period (Holmbukt & Son, 2017; see also Heggen & Thorsen, 2015). Hence, having a focus solely on English offers a better opportunity to have more in-depth discussions of academic content in connection with students' teaching activities, thus linking theory and practice more closely together. A similar view on a strengthened connection between academic content and practice can be witnessed from another informant, who states that:

We get theory connected to practice. We first learned the theoretical part of the grammar, got engaged in activities connected to the subject during the course, and finally got to make our own lesson plans, which were tested with pupils. (our translation)

Thus, putting theory and practice in an integrated domain, a third space, is perceived as positive and valuable, in terms of creating opportunities for reconceptualising and improving their own practice, not only through experience and reflection but also with a more solid theoretical foundation. This is in line with Bhabha's (Rutherford, 1990) view on a third space in which individuals develop new knowledge by drawing on the collective knowledge from distinct discourses, theory and practice, rather than seeing them as detached domains.

Another positive aspect of working in a third space, according to our informants, is the fact that they were able to try working in a third space several times, learn from making mistakes, and have immediate reflections after each teaching trial, again in accordance with Kolb's (2015) theory on the cycle of learning. The students find the sequence of experiences within a short period of time valuable to their learning process, as the try-fail attempts gave them opportunities to reflect on their pedagogical choices, in terms of why and how they do things the way they do (Holmbukt & Son, 2017). This may also help them reconceptualise their teaching in a positive direction. As a consequence of that,

the participants also find their third space experiences rewarding, as they seem to lead to increased self-confidence and security in teaching English.

Bhabha's (Rutherford, 1990) idea of a boundary-crossing, innovative space, which has the potential to bring about changes and development, is clearly at play in our experiment in creating a third space. Our attempts to merge theory and practice in an integrated domain conform with Bhabha's thinking on merging cultures to develop new strategies for coexistence, in the sense that students enhance their understanding of the subject and develop new knowledge by drawing on collective knowledge from both theory and practice.

### **Students' reflections on teacher education for the English subject**

Considering the positive effects of working in a third space in various ways, students wish to have more opportunities to work in a third space throughout the course. One respondent even claims that the third space strategy should be implemented not only in the English subject but also in other subjects in teacher education. The same respondent further suggests that working in a third space should be adopted from early on as part of the English curriculum (Holmbukt & Son, 2017).

In order to prepare student teachers to teach any subject, we believe that they should be given chances to meet real and authentic classroom situations more often and in a more controlled setting, where it is possible to reflect on their teaching activities in connection with academic knowledge. This is in line with Zeichner (2010), who argues that, to prepare student teachers for their future work in the best possible way, academic content on campus and practice trials in schools should be carefully coordinated. Our findings suggest that the third space offers a desired learning arena, where theory meets practice in a more constructive and integrative way. Our informants thus argue that working in a third space must be the right direction one should pursue in preparing student teachers for (and beyond) the English subject, given that the third space allows students to focus more on how to take theory further into actual classroom teaching (Holmbukt & Son, 2017) for better teaching practice.

The key findings we have presented above thus provide answers to our research question: *To what extent can working in a third space minimise the theory–practice divide in teacher education for English, and how can students benefit from it in their learning processes?*

It is shown that working in a third space does bring a tighter link between theory and practice, which affects students' teaching practice in a more positive direction, and that students benefit from this not only in consolidating their academic knowledge, but also in increasing their self-confidence in teaching English. This again confirms that students working in a third space are allowed better learning opportunities through new forms of activity and engagement, which may ultimately lead to changes in both their practice and their mindset, as

we have argued earlier. We have thus far experienced that working in a third space through the university–school partnership contributes to students’ learning in new and meaningful ways. Hence, grounding teacher education in practice can be seen as productive, in pursuit of better integration of theory and practice, hence expanding learning opportunities for better teaching practice (Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009; Klein et al., 2013; Zeichner, 2010), which was insufficient in our previous English courses.

## Challenges and remaining issues

Even though we witness a strengthened integration of theory and practice through our third space strategy, there still remain some problems and challenges that we need to overcome, in order to establish a more effective third space in which all participants are equally engaged. Bhabha (Rutherford, 1990) asserts that, in order to enable new perspectives and new structures of authority to emerge, it is necessary to bring the different domains into the third space with an equal hierarchy. In our context, this can be interpreted as creating a third space which promises a non-hierarchical, equal status of academic content and school practice, in the latter of which schoolteachers also play a central role. In our attempt to create a third space, however, the role of a schoolteacher has been fairly limited, which has also been a lingering problem in university–school partnerships (Thorsen, 2016; Zeichner, 2010).

When student teachers go out on ordinary school practice, a practice teacher<sup>4</sup> plays a central role as a mentor and supervisor in the process of developing students’ competences to become teachers. Similarly, the importance of the role of schoolteachers is also recognised in the third space epistemology, given that a third space is seen as an arena where university teachers and schoolteachers are equally important binaries (Jónsdóttir, 2015). However, as Zeichner (2010) points out, “even in the current wave of university–school partnerships in teacher education, colleges and universities continue to maintain hegemony over the construction and dissemination of knowledge, and schools remain in the position of “practice fields” [...] where student teachers are to try out the practices provided by the university” (Zeichner, 2010, p. 90; see also Barab & Duffy, 2000; Gorodetsky, Barak, & Hadari, 2007). Likewise, Thorsen’s (2016) findings also suggest that universities in Norway are still “the focal point of cooperation between universities and schools” (p. 183), with the former playing an authoritative role in determining the source of knowledge to be applied or practised during school practice. Practice teachers who participated in Thorsen’s study do not seem to have a sense of being equally valuable collaborators in

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<sup>4</sup> We distinguish between *practice teacher* and *schoolteacher* throughout the paper, where the latter refers to any teacher in a primary or secondary school, who may take part in university–school partnerships.

university–school partnerships, despite perceiving themselves as skilled and experienced schoolteachers. They tend, rather, to take a passive role, more as spectators than participants in what is supposed to be collaborative work. The disparity between the theory and practice fields thus still remains a central challenge in teacher education, even under the umbrella of university–school partnerships (Jónsdóttir, 2015; Zeichner, 2010).

In our attempt to create a third space, we must acknowledge that the same problem – the lack of active involvement of schoolteachers – has not been solved as yet; a schoolteacher has had a minor role in building a learning platform in our third space, apart from providing a group of pupils and their background information. A schoolteacher has normally been present when teaching schemes are tested out with pupils, but she/he has not been invited to reflection sessions so far, for practical reasons (such as escorting the pupils back to school or following school routines). Furthermore, the academic content for teaching trials and the reflective evaluation of teaching experiences have been determined mostly by university teachers, with little input from the schoolteacher. In our case of a third space, which is not yet fully developed, university teachers thus function as both providers of academic content and mentors, the latter role of which is normally played by practice teachers in ordinary teaching practice periods.

In order to bring about equal, non-hierarchical status among university teachers and schoolteachers, our third space must be modelled in such a way that schoolteachers have a more active and constructive role, not only in constructing academic content for teaching practice but also in students' learning processes through reflective evaluation of their teaching activities. Under the current design of English courses in teacher education, however, it is difficult to construct an equally distributed role between teacher educators and schoolteachers, mainly because a third space is not at the centre of the curriculum. Besides, bringing more involvement of schoolteachers into our English curriculum would require more resources and new arrangements in university–school partnerships. Therefore, if we want to establish a more successful third space in teacher education for English, the place to start seems to be with a re-evaluation of the current English curriculum, with possible curricular innovations which implement a third space as the centre of a learning platform. Arguments have been made that teaching practice should be the epicentre of teacher education, from which all other course elements emanate (Zeichner, 2010). Thus, we believe that a more practice-centred English curriculum is needed, in which there is no such traditional division between academic content and teaching practice. Instead, the two fields are intertwined, feeding each other, in building the necessary knowledge and competence for teaching English within the course curriculum (see also Grossman, Hammerness, & McDonald, 2009; Korthagen, 2008; Zeichner, 2010).

The need for curricular innovations for the English subject is also reflected in the findings discussed earlier, where students expressed a desire to have more third-space experiences. Learners' views and our critical evaluation of the third

spaces tested so far thus point to a common interest in making curricular changes, which place the third space at the centre of English courses. Such a curricular transformation would ensure reinforced integration of theory and practice, which may facilitate learning, in accordance with the way we envision how our students should be prepared for their future profession as expert practitioners.

Sir William Osler, one of the key figures in professionalising medical education by bringing medical students into clinical practice for the first time, once noted: “He who studies medicine without books sails an uncharted sea, but he who studies medicine without patients does not go to sea at all” (NCATE, 2010, p. 2). Likewise, without gaining sufficient academic knowledge, student teachers of English may manage to explore how to teach in the complex labyrinth of the teaching profession. However, prospective teachers studying without hands-on experience with learners will probably not find the entrance to that labyrinth in the first place. There is thus an emergent need to rethink how student teachers of English should prepare for their teaching profession, placing practice at the centre of teacher education.

## Conclusive remarks

In this article, we have addressed a long-lasting challenge in teacher preparation programmes in connection with theory–practice integration. By utilising the university–school partnership established in current Norwegian teacher education, we have discussed a teaching strategy that adopts the emerging epistemology of teacher education: a third space, which is an innovative, transformative and boundary-crossing arena and ensures better integration of distinctive domains towards new knowledge construction and enhanced learning (Rutherford, 1990). It has been indicated that working in a third space for teaching practice in English not only brings better integration of theory and practice but also has a positive effect on our students’ learning and pedagogical development. This supports the ideology of a third space, in terms of encouraging collegiality among the distinctive domains responsible for teacher preparation.

Despite the benefits of working in a third space, challenges in achieving a balanced status between teacher educators and schoolteachers have also been recognised. We have thus argued that, in order to establish a more effective third space in teacher education for English, we may need to reconceptualise how English courses in teacher education should be modelled with possible curricular innovations, which place a third space at the centre of the curriculum (Jónsdóttir, 2015; Zeichner, 2010). In our envisioned third space, the equal status of teacher educators and schoolteachers is also emphasised, not only in building practice-oriented course content but also in exercising a third space strategy. Exactly how we ensure such a balanced status remains an unresolved issue and one for further research.

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